

# Sacralization of Politics in the Context of Modern Georgia

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## Abstract

Sacralization of politics characterizes tyrannies and democracies alike, functioning as strengthening power bases and maintaining continuity of collective identity. The goal of the study was to register these two directional processes in the modern political context of Georgia. The political landscape of Georgia after gaining independence is characterized by oscillation of voters between charismatic and rational leaders. Inauguration speeches of the presidents were subjected to thematic analysis to reveal religious allusions. All of them although to a different degree referred to five main themes: Holy path and trial, hierarchies and Gods, rituals, national religious consciousness and anti secularism. Analysis proved the resemblance between the first and the third presidents, both being charismatic, emotional leaders, most often referring to holy path and trial, and religious national consciousness in contrast to the second president, who was steered more by rationality than emotion, referring to hierarchies and Gods, and rituals. Estimations of young voters of the leaders pointed to the preference to the first president – Gamsakhurdia. The idealization of the leaders occurred more in regard to charismatic leaders by those who proved to be less tolerant of ambiguity and hence, more striving to sustain black and white worldview. This result with some precautions can be taken as an indicator of the need to sacralize the leader and thus to maintain continuity and stability of collective identity.

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**Keywords:** Sacralization of politics, thematic analysis, leaders, voters' preferences

## Introduction

Political landscape of Georgia, a country nested between Turkey and Russia, has drastically changed after the dissolution of the Soviet Union,

constituent part of which it was. The struggle for independence activated in late eighties of the last century was steered by national idea and return to the God's province, as embodied by Georgian Orthodox Church. The declaration of independence in 1991 marked the transition of the country from the Soviet rule to democratic governance.

With little experience of independent statehood the ideological vacuum created by the transition was tried to be partially filled by asserting authority of traditional religion. The church attendance became massive, religious authorities gaining unprecedented social power.

On such a background it is more than natural that political leaders tried to legitimize their power through religious appeals. Sacralization of politics is not a new phenomenon. Since ancient times leaders were trying to ally themselves to deities, to point to the holy nature of their mission and thus to grant their power legitimacy. In different societies and times, in diverse geographical locations communities directly or indirectly revealed the need in faith, in sacred power, desire to be led by mission to alleviate over mundane realities. These two directional processes, of the need from below and the attempt from above, resulted in construction of politics as religion. The religious dimension in politics is revealed in both totalitarian and democratic regimes as sacralization of politics functions both as an instrument for obedience of masses to the leader and its ideology as well as a means for ensuring coherence and continuation of collective identity (Gentile, 2006).

Sacralization of politics is understood as a feature of modernity and secularization. The process is built on a religious nature and breeds a new sets of beliefs, myth and rituals taking on the characteristics and functions of traditional religion and creating a pseudo-religion. Political religion either tries to extinguish traditional religious institutions or to coexist with them symbiotically, assuming that they will be incorporated in the belief system and the myths of political religion and granting them only assisting role (Gentile, 2005).

Secular religion is an umbrella term for political religion and civil religion often used interchangeably. It became an object of systematic studies in the sixtieths of XX century after publication of "Civil religion in America" by Bellah (1967).

In the discourse on civil religion the functional approach advocated by Emil Durkheim prevails. Civil religion is seen as a factor of legitimation and consensus in pluralistic society. Religious belief reflects unity and identity of a collectivity with rituals, actions and myths serving to evoke and maintain it. Political religion in contrast to traditional religion is transient, although, the sources of their evolvment are far from short-lived (Gentile, 2006).

Since independence Georgia was ruled by three democratically elected presidents. In 2012, due to the change of Constitution, the supreme power in the country was transferred to the elected by the Parliament Prime-Minister. Political scene in Georgia is characterized by idolization of the leader followed by disillusionment resulting in his replacement. So far the country had three Presidents and three Prime-Ministers; all three Prime-Ministers being elected by the parliament in one electoral period that is since 2012 Parliamentary elections. The succession of leaders acquired systematic cyclic character, namely young, emotional, charismatic visionary with a vast power of mobilization of people is succeeded by a more rational, emotionally balanced leader, setting much more modest goals, but in his turn he is succeeded again by charismatic leader, and then again by a more rational one.

### **Research question**

The viability of political religion rests on the need of a leader to legitimize own power through alluding to religion and the need of populace to see in the leader God's choice. The goal of the study was to register these two directional processes in the modern political context of Georgia. More specifically, the research question concerns as to what degree presidents were engaged in religious appeals for maintaining and strengthening their power and to what degree the voters were giving them credit through idealization of their personality characteristics.

To this end, two exploratory studies were carried out. In the first one, the inauguration speeches of the presidents were analyzed for revealing their religious content, while in the second one the young voters were surveyed for assessing the ideal characteristics of the leader, as well as characteristics of the three presidents and the first Prime-Minister who created the coalition that won 2012 Parliamentary elections and who after a year office left the office on his own will.

### **Study 1**

*Aim:* the study aimed at revealing the religious nature of inauguration speeches of the three Presidents – Zviad Gamsakhurdia, Edward Shevardnadze and Mikhail Saakashvili.

*Methodology:* The five speeches, 1991 inaugural speech of Gamsakhurdia, 1995 and 2000 speeches of Shevardnadze and 2004 and 2008 speeches of Saakashvili (Matsaberidze, 2007) were subjected to narrative analysis. Narrative is defined as a “sensible organization of thought through language, internalized or externalized, which serves to create a sense of personal coherence and collective solidarity and to legitimize collective beliefs, emotions and actions”. (Hammack & Pilecki, 2012. p.78). The

narrative links individual to a social reality. Political leaders use narratives to increase the ranks of followers and to create a common aim and meaning through providing own interpretation of the past events and future objectives. Narratives of political leaders are typically studied through their political speeches (Reicher & Hopkins, 1996).

Five speeches were analyzed by thematic analyses of narratives. Thematic analysis is a method for “identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006 p.79).

*Results:* In presidential speeches five main religious themes were identified. The themes with examples are presented below:

1. Holly path and trial

*“I prayed to God and promised him that we will return to His realm, we will try to wash out stains of blood of the past, we’ll try to expiate the crimes committed by our and older generations against the God and the nation during decades”* (E. Shevardnadze, 2000).

*“Period after October, 28 was the tough trial of people and elected by them government, as the road to freedom is hard and thorny”* (Z. Gamsakhurdia, 1991).

2. Hierarchies and Gods

*“We have to revive the army traditions of David the Builder, King Giorgi and our heroes - 300 Aragvians and many more others”* (M. Saakashvili, 2004).

*“We made possible the impossible, but man cannot do impossible, cannot overcome insurmountable barriers, if not the God’s will”* (E. Shevardnadze, 2000).

3. Rituals

*“It’s not a coincidence that we raised the flag of Europe. This flag is the flag of Georgia as well, as it reflects the essence of our civilization, culture and history and our view of future”* (M. Saakashvili).

4. National religious consciousness

*“Contemporary movement by its inner essence is the national-religious movement, as it assumes not only the realization of national-political aims, but first of all targets at moral revival based on Christian faith and consciousness”* (Z.Gamsakhurdia, 1991).

5. Anti secularism

*“With the restoration of Independence orthodox faith should become state religion”* (Z.Gamsakhurdia, 1991).

All three presidents used these themes but to a different degree. The comparative analysis is presented in the Table 1.

Table 1  
The percentage of themes in presidents' speeches

President	Holly path and trial %	Hierarchies and Gods %	Rituals %	National religious consciousness %	Anti secularism %
Z. Gamsakhurdia	<u>24.4</u>	17,7	17,7	<u>26.6</u>	13,3
E. Shevardnadze	13,8	<u>36.1</u>	<u>30.5</u>	13,8	5,5
M. Saakashvili	<u>47.3</u>	15,7	15,7	<u>21.0</u>	0

The similar pattern can be easily traced in contents of the first and the third Presidents, both considered as charismatic leaders. Holly Path and Trail together with National Religious Consciousness was the most often mentioned by them. Different is the content of speeches of the second president who was renowned by his cunning and manipulative abilities. He in underlines Hierarchies and Gods and Rituals his speeches.

The election of the presidents and the content of their speeches were obviously determined by political context and popular demands. The leaders demonstrating features in need which eventually were supported and perpetuated by popular idealization.

The first president, Zviad Gamsakhurdia was a dissident in the Soviet period and was sentenced for his political activities by the regime. His vision of Georgia was as an independent country, free from communist ideology. He mobilized protest movements around the national idea which was saturated with religious connotations. The leading theme of his inauguration speech is Holly path and trail, national religious consciousness.

*“Our history, the way of life, fight for the faith, national independence is a path of martyrdom, Christian path of kindness and love (Gamsakhurdia, 1991).*

*“Worriers for freedom and democracy, society striving for the revival of religious and national worldviews is our present and the result of our fight (Gamsakhurdia, 1991).*

Edward Shevardnadze came to power after Gamsakhurdia was ousted by the opposing him military and paramilitary forces. The period that ensued was characterized by the chaos and criminality, lack of personal security and enforcement of justice. Shevardnadze's leading idea was establishing the order and ending the existing in the country chaos. He had a vast experience of leadership, in the Soviet period being the First Secretary of the Georgian Communist Party and then Foreign Minister of the Soviet Union. The great part of the population considered him as a wise leader able to bring in security and build the country. Shevardnadze was well aware that

in current situation his main culprit was his communist past and commitment to the ideology which was unacceptable almost exclusively. So, immediately after his airplane from Moscow landed in Georgia, he went straight to church. Soon he baptized and did not miss any chance to demonstrate his reverence and proximity to the head of the Georgian Church, who since independence, according to all the polls, consistently remains as the most revered leader. Shevardnadze's inauguration speech as well as the selection of the location for his follow up of speech - the main Cathedral of Georgia, and the date of inauguration which coincided with the Easter, all aimed to prove the change of his ideology.

*In the beginning of the nineties we did not have a state. Independence and sovereignty were declared only on the paper. The civil war and chaos were reigning. We established the order and rule of law (Shevardnadze, 2000).*

*It is symbolic that inauguration of newly selected President is carried on Rustaveli avenue, where in the communist past we all defended Georgian language as a state language together. Here, on Rustaveli Avenue, on 9<sup>th</sup> of April, the sacred blood of fighters for independence was shed. Here, their dream declaration of independence was realized (Shevardnadze, 2000).*

Shevardnadze's rule served as a background for the political appearance of Mikhail Saakashvili. He fit Gamsakhurdia's stance even in naming his party as United National Movement, changing only the shade – using foreign word for nationality instead of Georgian one. Although the Minister of Justice in Shevardnadze's government, he built his leadership in fierce and energetic opposition to Shevardnadze's rule, blaming him for communist legacy and covering up corruption. Young and energetic Saakashvili managed to mobilize the masses and unite opposition parties. His attempts succeeded and resulted in Shevardnadze's resignation. Saakashvili soon abandoned his allegations to national idea and proclaimed the state building as his mission. Although in speeches proclaiming adherence to Western values, his deeds showed the human's rights violations what he partially admitted, but considered as legitimate for achieving in his understanding a higher order value of state building. His religion allegations were less common than of previous two presidents, but instead he much more than they referred to historical figures for legitimization of his deeds.

*“Great difficulties are ahead on the way for achieving our aims, Georgia has to overcome great obstacles. We should revive our*

*country together, we should build the country according to our and our ancestors' dreams" (Saakashvili, 2000).*

*"I want to address all, who has gathered here, on very important for me day: here today with us is the spirit of the Georgia's greatest leader, of the most revered Georgian's – David Agmashenebeli's spirit. I want to tell him and, all the heroes who sacrificed their life to Georgia, that..." (Saakashvili, 2000).*

Thus, we can see that all three presidents abundantly use religious themes for legitimization of their power and enforcing their impact on masses.

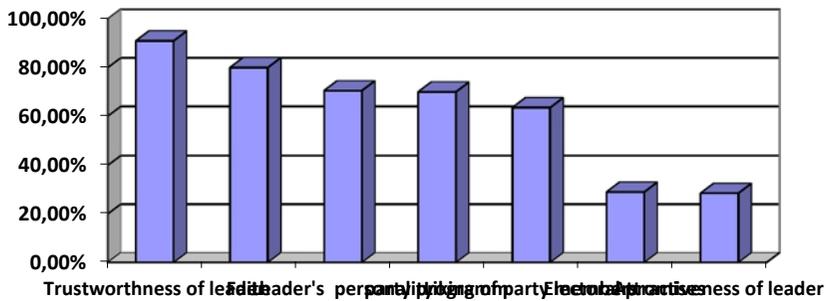
## **Study 2**

*Aim:* The study aimed to examine the other side of political stage – the voters, their perceptions of characteristics of an ideal political leader and the personality features of the country's four leaders, three Presidents and the Prime-Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili. The hypothesis was formulated according to which, the idealization would be more pronounced in regard to charismatic leaders and more by those with high scores on intolerance of ambiguity. The concept of intolerance of ambiguity was introduced in 1948 by Frenkel-Brunswik and since then stimulated multitude of research. It is considered as a personality variable describing among other things a person's inability to see possession of good and bad traits in the same person and rigid view of life. It is linked with authoritarianism (Furnham & Marks, 2013).

*Methodology:* The questionnaire was constructed for the study. Next to the designed for the study questions the instrument contained 16 items Tolerance of Ambiguity Scale (Budner, 1962).

*Results:* 200 young persons (55% female and 45% male) were interviewed in May-June of 2016. The age of the respondents varied from 18 to 35, 18-25 years olds constituted 55%, 26-30 years olds - 26% and 31-35 years olds - 19%. 96% of them had either University education or was a student.

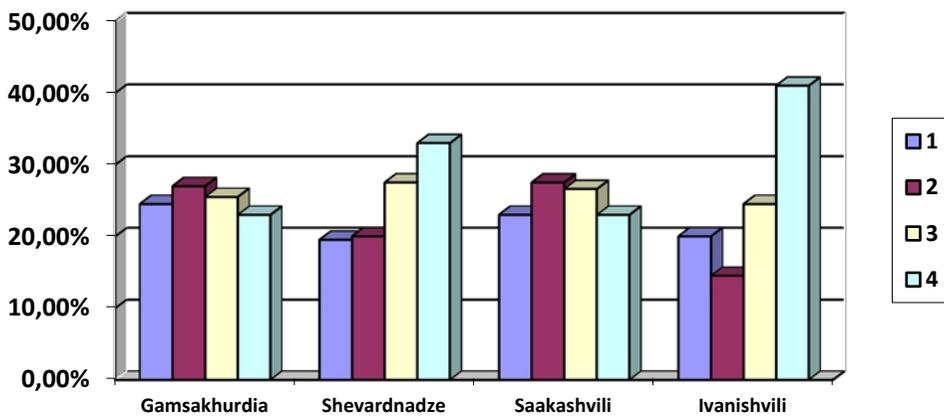
Respondents were requested to mark any issue from the listed 7 if applicable. Leader's personality proved to be of paramount importance for the decision to vote, being more important than his program. Three items checked by the biggest number of respondents were trustworthiness of the leader (91%), "doing what one preached" (80%) and leader's personality (70.5%).



Graph 1.

### Reasons for the decision to vote

Respondents were requested to give overall evaluation of political leaders – three presidents of Georgia and the Prime-Minister by rating them on a 4-point scale with 1 the most and 4 the least liked.



Graph 2.

### Ratings of political leaders

As can be seen from Graph 2, the most liked was Zviad Gamsakhurdia, narrowly followed by Mikhail Saakashvili, then Bidzina Ivanishvili. The least liked was Edward Shevardnadze.

The ratings of the personality features of the leaders reflect the same regularity, only with one exception as Shevardnadze is rated higher than Ivanishvili. The instrument listed 18 features, on each respondent had to rate leaders on a 5 point rating scale with 1 the least and 5 the most pronounced in the leader feature. Before rating leaders respondents were asked to rate desirability of each feature in a leader by the same instrument. All of the

features were positive; this enabled us to sum them up for comparison of ideal and factual leaders.

Table 2  
Sum of the scores of features of ideal and factual leaders

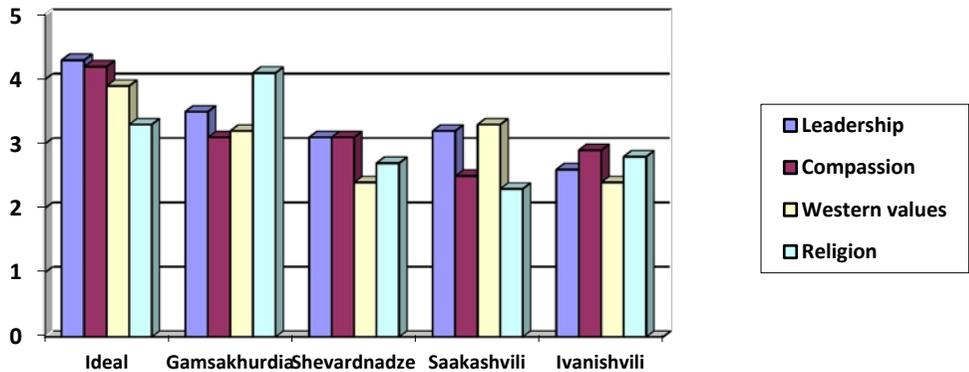
Rank	Leader	M	SD
	Ideal leader	74.3	9.4
1	Zviad Gamsakhurdia	62.1	9.7
2	Mikahail Saakashvili	54.9	11.6
3	Edward Shewardnadze	53.5	10.5
4	Bidzina Ivanishvili	47.6	14.9

For the ease of the analyses the ratings of ideal leader were factor analyzed. The analysis resulted in 4 components presented in the Table 3.

Table 3 Results of Factor analysis of the ratings of Ideal leader

	Factors			
	1	2	3	4
Abile to grasp reality	.597	.084	.491	.056
Able to plan	.692	.336	.122	-.082
Able to lead	.843	.226	.074	.045
Able to unify the country	.615	.271	.101	.121
Being moderate	.531	.462	.139	.156
Sticking to principles	.694	.068	.143	.149
Being just	.706	.188	.136	.187
Putting interests of the country before own interests	.704	.084	.139	.158
Being loyal to democracy building	.375	.133	.795	.114
Being intelligent	.574	.438	.240	.096
Able to give a good public speech	.498	.259	.152	.299
Able to make decisions quickly	.523	.276	.209	.232
Protecting traditions and national values	.255	.121	.156	.823
Being religious	.078	.184	.027	.867
Being loyal to Western values	.085	.211	.854	.087
Being competent in economic and social issues	.144	.823	.200	.006
Being compassionate	.283	.724	.049	.276
Being in control	.315	.752	.139	.251

We called the first factor with the highest loading on the items: “Able to lead”, “Being just” and “Putting interests of the country before own interests”, as Ability to Lead. The second factor with highest loadings on: “Being competent in economic and social issues”, “Being in control” and “Being compassionate” was called Compassion. The third factor with items: “Being loyal to Western values” and “Being loyal to democracy building” we called Western Values. The last factor with items: “Being religious” and “Protecting traditions and national values” was called Religion.



Graph 3

### Scores of an ideal and four factual leaders on factors

As can be seen from the Graph 3, the most desired are the qualities comprising “Ability to Lead” factor, followed by “Compassion”, then by “Western values” and “Religion”. Closest to ideal on all factors except “Western Values” is Zviad Gamsakhurdia. He considerably exceeds the mean rating of ideal leader on “Religion”. On “Western Values” factor Saakashvili is the leader, while he has the lowest ratings on “Compassion” and “Religion”. Among the four, Ivanishvili has the lowest rating on leading qualities.

To test the hypotheses on the link of leader’s idealization with Tolerance of Ambiguity the scores of the respondents on the scale were computed. The mean score for the Tolerance of Ambiguity was 72.9 (*Sd*=7.1). The respondents were grouped into those with low scores, ranging from 56 to 68, with medium scores, ranging from 69-74 and with high scores, ranging from 75 to 101) and compared ratings of these three groups on ideal and four factual leaders. The results confirmed our hypotheses – the persons exhibiting low Tolerance of Ambiguity more positively rated charismatic leaders than those with higher scores in the scale.

Table 4

Results of ANOVA on Tolerance for Ambiguity Scale with mean scores on presidents’ characteristics

Presidents	Low Tolerance M and SD	Medium Tolerance M and SD	High Tolerance M and SD	F, df, p
Zviad Gamsakhurdia	64.6 9.9	60.4 8.4	61.6 10.4	F=3.2; df=2; p<.05
Eduard Shevardnadze	54.5 10.8	54.1 10.9	52.1 9.3	n.s.
Mikheil Saakashvili	57.6 11.2	51.3 9.9	55.9 12.6	F=5.2; df=2; p<.05
Bidzina Ivanishvili	48.8 14.9	49.0 13.7	45.3 15.7	n.s.

Results of the study pointed on the tendency of the idealization of charismatic leaders by those who scored low on Tolerance of Ambiguity.

## Conclusions

Thematic analysis of presidents' speeches clearly demonstrated the presence of religious allusions aimed at strengthening legitimacy of the power. The identified by thematic analysis five main themes: Holy path and trial, hierarchies and Gods, rituals, national religious consciousness and anti-secularism were exploited in speeches of all three presidents although to a different degree. Analysis proved the resemblance between the first and the third presidents, both being charismatic , emotional leaders who most often referred to the themes of holly path and trial, and religious national consciousness in contrast to the second president, who was steered more by rationality than emotion and who most often referred to the themes of hierarchies and Gods, and rituals.

Estimations of young voters of the four leaders of the modern Georgia, three presidents and the prime minister pointed to the preference to the first president – Gamsakhurdia. The idealization of the leaders occurred more in regard of charismatic leaders by those who proved to be less tolerant of ambiguity and hence more striving to sustain black and white worldview. This result with some precautions can be taken as an indicator of the need to sacralize the leader and this way to maintain continuity and stability of collective identity.

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